

Is the Parliament merely a building?



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Of course, a new building is needed for Parliament. The existing one was constructed way back in 1927. It was not planned then according to the needs of the bicameral legislature. Now that Delhi faces a higher risk of earthquakes, the existing building is not so safe. If the constituencies are re-demarcated in 2026, the number of members both in the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha may ratchet up, not increased as they've been for the past 50 years. But the existing Parliament building does not have space or facilities enough to accommodate the numerically strong MPs in the future. These points are indisputable. The reasons for a new building cited by former Speakers Meira Kumar and Sumithra Mahajan can hardly be dismissed either.

However, what one cannot turn a blind eye to is the fact that Parliament does not merely denote a building and is not a matter

of space. Parliament connotes the soul of our cherished democracy.

Changes in Parliament building

In the existing Parliament building several changes have been effected post-Independence. Way back in 1956, two floors were constructed and in 2006 a museum was built. On the one hand, the rulers were strengthening the Parliament building and on the other, they kept weakening the Parliament-based democratic system. The peak of demoralization and destruction of democracy was the Emergency.

When the power shifted to the leaders who were the direct victims of state oppression during the Emergency, we believed that the lessons they would have learned will aid the safeguarding of our democracy. But the same leaders instead of rejecting the violence of power have actually taken the nation back to the same situation it was in fifty years ago.

President not invited

Article 79 of the Indian Constitution states very clearly: "There shall be a Parliament for the Union, which will consist of the President and two Houses to be called respectively the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) and the House of the People (Lok Sabha)."

Our Parliament can function even without Prime Minister. But it cannot do so without President because it is he or she, as the formal head of the country, who has powers to convene and prorogue the sessions of Parliament. Besides, a Bill passed in Parliament will become law only if President grants approval.

Our Constitution has granted a special status to President as the formal head of our Parliamentary democracy. Hence the move to inaugurate the new Parliament building without inviting the

President flies in the face of the Constitutional powers granted to her and is also an insult to her.

The BJP, which tried to gain some political mileage, priding itself on having appointed a woman of a tribal community as President, has now ignored her. Now inevitably the question is doing the rounds whether the BJP has sidelined the President just because she belongs to a tribal community.

Parliament does not consist of the Lok Sabha (House of People) alone but also of the Rajya Sabha (Council of States). In the invite for the event, the name of the Vice-President too has not figured as the chairman of the Rajya Sabha. If the Vice-President's name had been inserted into the invite, the name of the President could not have been avoided. Probably it was for this reason that the V-P too has been sidelined.

PM in Parliament

The BJP members harp on the new Parliament building as a global feather added to the BJP cap. But the irony is that it is the same BJP's rule that has caused the institution of Parliament to get weakened and deteriorate.

It is to be recalled that when entering the portals of Parliament for the first time after the election as PM, Modi bent so humbly that his forehead touched the ground. Then we expected him to continue this practice that sounds like something akin to going to a temple. But abysmally he has turned an atheist as far as Parliament is concerned. Besides, he spoke in Parliament only 24 times during the period of 2014-February, 2023. As it was compulsory and customary for the PM to speak on the Motion of thanks to the President's address in Parliament, Modi had to speak; apart from that, he spoke only a couple of times.

BJP politics

It is the BJP government, which has passed a large number of ordinances (ordinance is resorted to for some urgent purpose though Parliament is not in session). Usually, only a ruling party, which has no majority in Parliament, turns to the ordinance route. The BJP-led NDA government has a majority (over 300 members) in Parliament. Then why it should take the ordinance route is a puzzle.?

Besides, the government passes Bills in the name of the Money Bill in order to avoid discussions in the Rajya Sabha. Normally only the Bills on taxation, expenditure, and so on are pigeonholed as Money Bills. However, the BJP government passes even Bills outside the purview of the category. It passed even the Aadhar Bill in the same manner.

The standing committees of Parliament too are being made meaningless and toothless. It has become the BJP government's practice to refuse to send Bills to a standing committee and even if it sends the Bills, it just ignores the changes in toto suggested by the committee.

It is a golden rule that there shall be a gap of two days between the introduction of a Bill and its passage. On the contrary, several Bills are passed on the very day or the next day of their introduction.

The union government has made it a point to pass even the most important Bills without any trace of discussion. It speaks volumes about its dubious achievement that it passed the Budget too without giving room for anybody to air opinions. All mouths be gagged!

Since the ruling party has no majority in the Rajya Sabha, it has achieved a notoriety of sorts, flouting the Parliamentary conventions by suspending the Rajya Sabha members and thereby creating an artificial majority and rejecting demands for voting, in contravention of the rule which says very clearly that even if a

single member demands to vote on a Bill or on any important issue, for that matter, voting shall be conducted.

The message, BJP style!

While having weakened and sapped the energy of the institution of Parliament, they say they have constructed the building very solidly. But the million-dollar question is how it will be useful to democracy.

Moreover, the day (May 28) chosen for the inauguration of the new building is their favorite leader Savarkar's birthday. Does the BJP subtly convey the message that the path the party leaders and cadre want to tread further is by no means democratic?

When Emergency was declared in India, historian Ranajit Guha said, "The Indian democracy is already dead. Now its corpse is buried."

Nonetheless, democracy has fortunately risen from the dead somehow like the proverbial Phoenix, and has been going steady and strong. Whoever tries to send democracy back to the grave, the Indians will never allow the inimical attempt.

Translated by V. Mariappan